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ABSTRACT

In the 1980s, interest in collaboration between vocational education and the private sector was stimulated by changes taking place in the economy and society (changes such as a maturing society, the lure of the sunbelt, the computer revolution, declining superpowers, rise of minorities, foreign competition, progress of women, and medical miracles). Linkages were established between vocational education and employers. Some of these linkages are merely public relations; however, linkages can serve higher purposes in the areas of policy, administration, programs, and facilities and equipment. Characteristics of effective linkages include the following: (1) the relationship is important and is given adequate resources and attention; (2) it is a long-term investment; (3) the partners are interdependent; (4) the organizations are integrated on points of communication; (5) both partners are kept informed; (6) the partnership is institutionalized; (7) the collaborative effort is internationalized; and (8) the partnership is inspired to contribute to the economic growth and social welfare of the global community. (KC)

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COLLABORATION IN THE 21st CENTURY

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COLLABORATION IN THE 21st CENTURY

Ways in Which Vocational Education and Training Institutions Can Establish Effective Linkages with Employers

Today is December 4, 2009 in the Plaza Room of the new Orlando Peabody Hotel. Our membership has increased from 100 people at the time of our founding to more than 200,000 members worldwide. With the advances in our telecommunications capability, all of our members can observe us from the comfort of their own homes. You are among the select group that has been called together to chart our future directions.

The goal today is to finalize the program around our chosen theme on effective linkages with employers for the IVETA Congress to be held this summer -- in celebration of our 25th anniversary. In planning for today's meeting, I came across a paper that I had prepared in 1989, "Collaboration in the 21st Century". Perhaps this old paper will show how far we have come since.

Vocational education was started by a collaborative effort among the National Association of Manufacturers, the AFL-CIO, forward-looking educators, and members of Congress. We had collaboration then and we certainly have it today in 2009.

Let's review where we are today:

- Civic, business, union, and education leaders at the local level are jointly planning education and training programs that truly serve needs of both individuals and the work place. Some of these programs are offered in schools, some in business and industry.

- Vocational education and training legislation in most nations strongly emphasizes collaboration among government, business, labor and education.

- For the first time, adequate funds are available for programs because all parties concerned understand the needs and agree on how they should be met.

- New economic alliances have been established. Within these alliances, barriers to the movement of goods and workers across national borders have been removed. Nations within these communities have established common worker qualifications and are cooperating on training, testing, and certification. Increasingly, jobs are allocated on a new international pattern.

- International trading partners are establishing joint venture agreements that include strong training components.

- In international development, donor countries are forming business-labor-education teams to work with counterpart teams in developing nations.

Collaborative efforts received a big push in the 1980's. In the six year period from 1983-1989 education partnerships increased from 42,000 to over 140,000 and almost 60 percent of these were business/education partnerships (Conference Board, 1989).

In the 80's, the trend was for most major companies to launch self-improvement campaigns (e.g., excellence programs, quality programs) as the trend for globalization heated up many issues. In fact, there were ten major issues shaping America:

- A maturing society
- Lure of the sunbelt
- Computer revolution
- Foreign competition
- Women on the move
- Rise of minorities
- Declining superpowers
- Government under fire
- Education boom
- Medical miracles

(U.S. News and World Report, 1984)

According to Kanter (1989), "The 1980's opened with the discovery of the entrepreneur and the promise of great wealth to be attained by the creative innovator. The decade threatened to close with a continuing stream of reports about lay offs, cutbacks, deficits, stock market plunges, airline safety crises, [an illiterate work force,] declining income and the growth of a self-perpetuating underclass."

The interest in collaboration between vocational education and the private sector was stimulated by these changes taking place in our economy and society. Thus, the time was ripe for corporations to open their boundaries and to form strategic alliances. Cooperation with the vocational education and training enterprise would raise performance standards by building commitment to shared goals and enhancing the ability to work together.

Soon the lesson was learned. Strategic alliances and partnerships are a potent way to do more with less and to do it better. But, what are the ways in which vocational education and training institutions can establish effective linkages with employers?

Purposes of Linkage

Much that has been done in the name of "linkage" is merely superficial public relations. For example, advisory committees have been used by educators to obtain support for existing programs and by businesses to give the appearance of supporting education. I would like to suggest that linkages can serve higher purposes in the areas of policy, administration, programs, and facilities and equipment.

Policy. High level representation from business, labor, government, and education can make meaningful input to legislative policy, administrative regulation, and program direction. No clear national policy on manpower, education, and training exists in America. However, there are many examples of national committees that have established policy directions for educational programs. For example, the U.S Department of Labor formed a blue-ribbon panel in 1988 to explore the skills gap and the issues that affected it. This commission was chaired by the former President of Bethlehem Steel and included 20 experts representing business, labor, government, education, and the public. The Commission's report offered 44 recommendations to the Secretary of Labor and would undoubtedly influence departmental policy, regulations, and programs.

Administration. Collaboration between vocational education and training and employers can be enhanced by advisory committees at almost any level provided that they have a purposeful scope of work. State Councils on Vocational Education are now required to have majority representation by employers and union leaders. For example, the Ohio Council on Vocational Education -- the state advisory committee -- conducted an independent study which examined effective links between vocational-technical education and private industry councils. This study was the basis for four recommendations that would influence the nature of these linkages.

Program. Business, labor, government, and education can cooperate in various ways on projects to improve programs. For example, a community college, labor union, and company management can cooperate on a project to improve workplace literacy. Such an effort led by the Columbus City Schools is having phenomenal results. Government involvement in the partnership theme increases the support given to economic development efforts, programs for displaced workers, and the Job Training Partnership Act programs.

Facilities and Equipment. An imbalance of facilities in both educational institutions and businesses can be alleviated by joint planning. Surplus educational facilities can be used for small business incubators, adult education classes, technical centers, job training programs or community meeting space. Businesses, on the other hand, may be the best place for the conduct of an industry-specific training program that requires state-of-the-art equipment.

Effective Linkages

What makes a linkage effective? Successful partnerships according to Kanter (1989) tend to have six characteristics:

1. The relationship is ***Important***, and therefore gets adequate resources, management attention, and sponsorship' there is no point in going to the trouble of a partnership unless it has strategic significance.

2. There is an agreement for longer-term ***Investment***, which tends to help equalize benefit over time.

3. The partners are ***Interdependent***, which helps keep power balanced.

4. The organizations are ***Integrated*** so that the appropriate points of contact and communication are managed.

5. Each is ***Informed*** about the plans and directions of the other.

6. Finally, the partnership is ***Institutionalized*** -- bolstered by a framework of supporting mechanisms, from legal requirements to social ties to shared values, all of which in fact make trust possible.

To these six I-factors, I would add two others.

7. Collaborative efforts are ***Internationalized*** because the new worldwide economy requires it of us.

8. The partnership is ***Inspired*** to contribute to the economic growth and social welfare of our global community.

When the history of the next two decades is written, one of the true success stories will be the capacity of vocational education and training to establish effective linkages with relevant sectors of society. Perhaps you know of some successes that we can share.

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